

Norton Says Pulling Park Police from Troubled D.C. Parks Means Even More D.C. Crime - July 20, 2006

Norton Says Pulling Park Police from Troubled D.C. Parks Means Even More D.C. Crime and Requests Capitol Police Help on the Mall Instead

July 20, 2006

Washington, DC-Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) today released a letter she wrote to the Capitol Police Board, which oversees the operations of U.S. Capitol Police, formally requesting temporary assistance during the evening hours for the "hard pressed U.S. Park Police," in response to five muggings and assaults on the National Mall during May and July. Norton wrote that the temporary assistance would be a natural extension of the Capitol Police mission to protect Members of Congress and visitors to the Capitol because, overwhelmingly, the victims of the recent attacks have been visitors to the nation's capital, and virtually all of the visitors to the Mall visit the Capitol and are constituents of Members of the House and Senate. "We in the Congress have an obligation to do all that we can to ensure that these visitors, most of whom are constituents of Members of the House and Senate, are as safe when they leave the Capitol and visit federal property just a few blocks away as they are on the Capitol grounds," Norton said.

The Congresswoman held meetings with Park Police and National Park Service officials after the attacks and got a higher police presence and more lighting on paths. Norton said that officers need direct relief from 12-hour days now because borrowing from other Park Police jurisdictions in the District, Maryland and Virginia that are more dangerous than the Mall will only increase criminal activity there. "Protecting the Mall should not come at the expense of Park Police jurisdiction in Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia. We cannot justify borrowing Park Police from park areas in the District, which is already undergoing a crime emergency, or from the region, while the Capitol Police continue to operate exclusively only within its small, albeit important, jurisdiction," she said.

Norton cited "a stark disparity" since 9/11 between funding for officers for the Capitol Police, who have received a 105 percent increase and Park Police funding at only a 23 percent increase. She said that beefing up protection of the Capitol and surrounding sites that are potential terrorist targets was fully warranted. However, Norton said, "No one can doubt that the Capitol Police force has more than enough officers to offer some temporary assistance to the Park Police without posing a risk to the Capitol jurisdiction or doubt that our Capitol Police would be willing to help fellow officers." The members of the Board are Alan Hantman, Architect of the Capitol; Wilson Livingood, House Sergeant at Arms; and William Pickle, Senate Sergeant at Arms.

Norton, who frequently walks the Mall for exercise, plans to continue to make unannounced visits there in the coming weeks to assure continuity of a uniformed police presence.

The full text of the Norton letter follows.

July 20, 2006

Alan Hantman

Architect of the Capitol

Wilson Livingood

House Sergeant at Arms

William Pickle

Senate Sergeant at Arms

Dear Capitol Police Board:

I am writing to ask that the Capitol Police be authorized to offer temporary assistance to fellow officers in the hard pressed U.S. Park Police. I am sure most Members of Congress would agree that such temporary assignments, particularly in the evenings, in the midst of a crime spike on the National Mall, would be a natural extension of the Capitol Police mission to protect Members and visitors to the Capitol. Virtually all of the visitors to the Mall are constituents of Members of the House and Senate, whose primary visits are to the Capitol and the Mall, where the museums, the World War II Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Washington Monument are all located. The Mall is located within a couple of blocks of downtown hotels, and its reputation for safety, its beautifully lighted monuments and inviting pathways around them have made evening walks on the Mall a tourist tradition.

Historically, the Mall has been crime-free even during periods when crime elsewhere in the District has been serious. However, within two months, five attacks by armed gunmen have occurred on visitors to the National Mall, all of whom were walking in groups of at least two. In May, armed gunmen attacked three separate couples on the Mall, including sexual assaults in two of the attacks. Recently this month, two armed men robbed a couple, including a sexual assault and shortly thereafter that same night, the same men robbed a family of four, including their two children. Not surprisingly, these attacks have been almost exclusively, though not intentionally, on visitors from out of town because the Mall area is frequented by many of the 20 million visitors from throughout the country and world who come to the nation's capital annually, especially during the peak summer tourist season. We in the Congress have an obligation to do all that we can to ensure that these visitors, most of whom are constituents of Members of the House and Senate, are as safe when they leave the Capitol and visit federal property just a few blocks away as they are on the Capitol grounds.

Congress has generously increased Capitol Police funding since FY02 105 percent but the Park Police budget has increased only 23 percent. The comparison in officers is starkly incomparable: an approximately 50 percent increase in Capitol Police officers compared to almost no change in the number of Park Police officers. About half of the Park Police force is in the National Capital Region (the rest is in New York City and San Francisco), where they cover over 24,000 acres of patrol jurisdiction in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia, including historic sites, neighborhood parks, river parkland, and forest tracts. The National Mall and Memorial Parks area alone cover 1,200 acres stretching from the Capitol grounds to the Lincoln Memorial and from a section of the White House area to Hains Point, including neighborhood parks. However, the U.S. Capitol Police protect 120 acres consisting mostly of buildings but have three times as many sworn officers as the Park Police. A few examples of the vast Park Service jurisdiction in this region help illustrate the challenge: In Virginia, Arlington National Cemetery, 650 acres; Turkey Run District, 7,000 acres; Wolf Trap, 130 acres; Great Falls Park, 856 acres; in Maryland: Great Falls Park, 856 acres; Greenbelt Park, 1,200 acres, Oxon Hill Love Park, 460 acres; in the District: Rock Creek Park District, 1,700 acres; Anacostia Park District, 800 acres; and Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, 50 acres.

When I visited the Mall area in the evenings, I spoke with officers who had been borrowed from areas more dangerous than the Mall. Most were working 12 hour days. These officers need direct and immediate relief. A temporary assignment of officers from the Capitol Police during evening and night hours when Congress usually has few visitors is the only practical and realistic way to get some help for the Park Police now. However, I am working simultaneously on longer range solutions, including seeking funds from the final appropriation and discussions with the Deputy Secretary of the Interior concerning deployment of officers. I am deeply concerned about reports that a Park Police class has just been canceled because of insufficient funding to assure annualized funding of more officers.

I applaud the decision to amply fund reinforcements for the Capitol Police. After 9/11, the Capitol and its surrounding buildings and sites became particularly inviting terrorist targets. No one can doubt, however, that the Capitol Police force has more than enough officers to offer some temporary assistance to the Park Police without posing a risk to the Capitol jurisdiction, or that our Capitol Police would be willing to help fellow officers.

Protecting the Mall should not come at the expense of Park Police jurisdiction in Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia. We cannot justify borrowing Park Police from park areas in the District, which is already undergoing a crime emergency, or from the region, while the Capitol Police continue to operate exclusively only within its small, albeit important, jurisdiction. I request your assistance on the Mall to help protect the constituents of Members of the House and Senate, and look forward to an early reply.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Holmes Norton

P.S. I am authorized to inform you that Police Chief Charles Ramsey and United States Attorney Kenneth Wainstein believe my request is fully consistent with the work the city is doing to combat crime in the District of Columbia.

Cc: Metropolitan Police Chief Charles Ramsey

United States Attorney Kenneth Wainstein